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ABSTRACT

This research was a pilot study that evaluated the impact of relationship schemas and the quality of children's friendships in children's person perception. This study extends previous work in this area in three ways by: (1) examining how children integrate multiple types of information to form impressions of others; (2) evaluating the impact of relational schemas (internally represented relationship knowledge) in children's person perception; and (3) correlating children's friendship quality to relational schemas. Fifty African-American children (24 males and 26 females from grades 3 and 4) participated in the present research. Children were asked to complete two friendship questionnaires and two impression-rating questionnaires. Overall, higher or more positive ratings were consistently attributed to children presented to best friends than as nonfriends. Several dimensions of friendship quality were associated with behavioral impression ratings, but it did not predict the type of processing (categorical vs. individuating) used by children when presented with information that was either consistent or inconsistent with an initial relational expectancy. (Author/SLD)

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Relational Schemas and Friendship Quality in Inner-city School Children

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Authors Notes

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Abstract

The present research is a pilot study that evaluates the impact of relational schemas and the quality of children's friendships in children's person perception. This study extends on previous work in this area in three ways: (1) examines how children integrate multiple types of information to form impressions of others; (2) evaluates the impact of relational schemas (internally represented relationship knowledge) in children's person perception; and (3) correlates children's friendship quality to relational schemas. Fifty African-American children (24 males and 26 females from Grades 3 and 4) participated in the present research. Children were asked to complete two friendship questionnaires and two impression-rating questionnaires. Overall, higher or (more positive) ratings were consistently attributed to children presented as best friends than as non-friends. Several dimensions of friendship quality were associated with behavioral impression ratings, but it did not predict the type of processing (categorical vs. individuating) utilized by children when presented with information that was either consistent or inconsistent with an initial relational expectancy.

Relational Schemas and Friendship Quality in Inner-city School Children

Children enter new social experiences with expectations based on preexisting categorical information, such as gender and race, derived from previous behavioral information and prior experiences (McAninch, Manolis, Milch, & Harris, 1993). Many times children's preexisting categorical information may be inconsistent with new experiences, and children must process information that is incongruent with their expectancies. In addition, a category in children's person perception that has not been examined much is schemas about relationships. Relational schemas are "cognitive structures representing regularities in patterns of interpersonal relatedness" (Baldwin, 1992, p. 461), and are influential in children's person perception. The present study focused on African-American children's person perception about others as a function of relationship information and congruent versus incongruent behavioral information. In addition, the quality of children's friendships was examined in relation to these variables.

Relational Schemas

Children make sense of others in several ways. First, children utilize stereotypical or categorical-based processing by referring to the attributes of individuals, such as gender, race, and age. Second, children make sense of others through characteristics or features based on more individuating behavioral information, or attribute-based processing. Furthermore, relational schemas (characteristics that define kinds of relationships) is another type of categorical-based processing children may use to form impressions of others.

As a leading theory in the area of person perception, Fiske and Neuberg's (1990) continuum model describes person perception processes as a continuum, from category-

based processing to attribute-based (individuated) processing. While an extensive literature on the use of categorical information in person perception exists in the adult social psychological literature (i.e., age, race, and gender), in both the child and adult literatures relatively little attention has been devoted toward the question of how people use the category of relationships (*relational schemas*) to formulate impressions. A relational schema is another category of the impression formation process and focuses on person perception about relationships, rather than on the self or others in isolation (Baldwin, 1992). Relational schemas include social scripts of interaction patterns for the self, and for others. A relational schema for the self represents how the self is experienced in that particular interaction pattern (relationship), and a schematic relational representation of others contains a social script for the other person in the interaction.

Oftentimes traits and characteristics are not attributed to persons, but are attributed to the social relationships between them. These attributes that define, differentiate, and comprise relationships are "relational qualities" (Fiske & Haslam, 1996), and can be differentiated according to abstract, formal features or qualities with social significance. Relationships also encompass culturally construed cognitive models that coordinate interaction, such as shared understandings of the rules and norms governing social transactions. Children (e.g., best friends, enemies, non-friends) may define certain types of relationships, but these relationship types cannot merely be reduced to the attributes of those children. Therefore, "the role does not inhere in the individual, but characterizes an interaction pattern performed with reference to a shared cultural construct" (Fiske & Haslam, 1996, p. 143).

Social scientists consider person perception as the use of inferences "regarding the traits, motivations, and probable behavior of others" (Feldman & Ruble, 1988, p. 1339), and aids in the understanding of individuals' choices and behaviors in social relationships. When an individual encounters another person it is assumed that the individual will formulate inferences about the target, which are highly influential in subsequent interactions (Kelley, 1972), and may be a powerful factor in the establishment of common ground (Gottman, 1983), which is important to dyadic relationships such as friendships. In addition, according to Baldwin (1992), people internalize their relationship knowledge about those who are important to them; and this knowledge influences their future relationships and their sense of self. However, developmental research focusing on the impact of internally represented relational schemas on person perception and management has been scant. The present research addressed this need, directly comparing the use of information derived from relational schemas to the use of behavioral information either congruent or incongruent with the schemas.

McAninch et al. (1993) argues that very little research has examined how children integrate different types of information in forming impressions of people. The majority of person perception research examines only one categorical trait (i.e., sex or personality characteristics). However, individuals' social-information processing is often very complicated, usually integrating multiple sources of categorical information. Children often use a combination of categorical (such as age, sex, and race) and behavioral information when forming impressions. Thus, an important dimension often excluded from person perception research in the developmental literature is friendship quality.

Friendship Quality

The quality of friendships is seen as a potential contributor to children's social adjustment (Bukowski & Hoza, 1989; Parker & Asher, 1993). In recent years, several indicators of friendship quality or relational processes have been identified in children's dyadic relationships (e.g., validation, recreation, intimacy, and conflict).

The features that are evident in children's friendships may be significant factors in school adjustment. However, the literature making specific predictions about which features affect school adjustment is sparse. The present study aims to examine the linkage between relational schemas and friendship quality in the classroom context.

Method

Fifty African-American children (26 males and 24 females from Grades 3 and 4) participated in the present research. Two studies were used in the present research.

Study 1. Children were asked to complete two questionnaires: a friendship nominations measure and a Friendship Quality Questionnaire (adapted from Parker and Asher, 1993). For friendship nominations, children were given a class roster of all their classmates, were asked to circle the names of all of their friends, and were asked to place an "X" next to the name of their very best friend in their classroom. For the Friendship Quality Questionnaire, children were asked to answer thirty items about their best friend on a 5 point scale, ranging from 0 – 4, "not at all true" to "really true." The goal of Study 1 was to ascertain the quality of children's friendships.

Study 2. There were two phases to Study 2. For Phase 1, each child listened to an audiotape about a hypothetical peer named "Chris" and formulated initial impression ratings based on a scale from 1-6, "very little" to "very much." These questions were

tailored to evaluate stereotypic relational information about a best friend or non-friend. During Phase 2, each child was presented with a vignette describing either positive or negative interactions between the child and the hypothetical peer from Phase 1, plus some additional behavioral information. This questionnaire assessed how positive or negative behavioral information in Phase 2 influenced the relational schema from Phase 1.

Materials and Procedure

The present design includes Grade and Gender effects, and the factorial combination of Relationship Expectancy (Best Friend, Non-Friend) and Behavioral Information Vignette (Positive, Negative) as independent variables. There were two phases to Part 1 of the study. During both phases, each child formed impression ratings of a hypothetical peer named "Chris." Children were told that the hypothetical peer named "Chris" was either a Best Friend or a Non-Friend (Phase 1); and engaged in either mostly Positive behaviors, or mostly Negative behaviors (Phase 2). Dependent variables included questions assessing relational and behavioral evaluations of "Chris."

During Phase 1, children received information about a potential relationship: either a best friend or a non-friend. Following McAninch et al. (1993), children answered questions, rating their initial impressions of the target child "Chris" based upon what they just heard and read. The response format was a six-point Likert rating scale, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 6 (very much).

For Part 2, the 6 features of friendship were examined in relation to the independent variables in Part 1.

Results

Phase 1 (Relational Impression Ratings)

A 2 (Grade Level: 3, 4) x 2 (Sex of Evaluator: Male, Female) x 2 (Relationship Expectancy: Best Friend, Enemy) MANOVA on 6 impression questions. Univariate ANOVAs conducted as follow-ups to the MANOVA.

Higher (more positive) ratings consistently attributed to children presented as best friends than as non-friends: friendlier, better liked, argued less. In addition, females who received the non-friend relational expectancy were more sure (confident) of their impression ratings than males who received the non-friend relational expectancy and females who received the best friend relational expectancy.

Phase 2: (Relational and Behavioral Impression Ratings)

A change score was calculated for each question (Phase 2 minus Phase 1). A 2 (Grade Level: 3, 4) x 2 (Sex of Evaluator: Male, Female) x 2 (Relationship Expectancy: Best Friend, Enemy) x 2 (Behavioral Information: Positive, Negative) MANOVA on 6 impression questions. Univariate ANOVAs conducted as follow-ups to the MANOVA.

Overall, there was a greater mean change (more positive) in liking ratings of children (regardless of sex) who received the non-friend relational expectancy and positive behavioral vignette. Also, among males there was a greater mean change (more negative) for the best friend relational expectancy and positive behavioral vignette (see Figure 1).

In sum, males mean change in liking was greater for the negative behaviors of a best friend (more negative), and a greater mean change in liking occurred in females' ratings of positive behaviors of a non-friend (more positive).

Finally, the correlations computed between relational and behavioral impression ratings, and the friendship quality subscales indicated that mean changes in friendly, liking, and sharing were associated with higher intimate exchange, and validation and caring. The correlations ranged from .39 to .55, and were statistically significant ($p<.05$).

Discussion

Results demonstrated that children's perceptions of their friendships (relational schemas) are related to quality of the relationship; and more specifically, higher or (more positive) ratings were consistently attributed to children presented as best friends than as non-friends. Overall, liking ratings of Chris were more stable in the congruent information conditions (best friend/positive behavior; non-friend/negative behavior) than in the incongruent information conditions. Generally, there was a greater mean change in ratings for children presented with positive behavioral information.

Categorical-based processing more likely to be utilized by children. Relationships may serve as "strong" categories in person perception (i.e., best friend, non-friend). Generally, there was a greater mean change in ratings for children presented with behavioral information incongruent with initial relational expectancy.

The present study indicated relational and behavioral impression ratings predict the friendship processes (i.e., intimate exchange, validation and caring). More research examining these features of friendship and types of processing utilized by children is needed.

Another step in this research would be to evaluate friendship quality and person perception in the relation of behaviors that are congruent and incongruent with relational schemas in specific situational and cultural contexts.

The motivational implications of relational schemas also need to be explored. This will aid in the understanding of the goals as to why certain children may pursue certain types of relationships, or avoid others. Furthermore, varying types of social relationships of children (e.g., bully-victim, and other conflictual dyads) need to be evaluated in relation to the qualitative dimensions of friendship.

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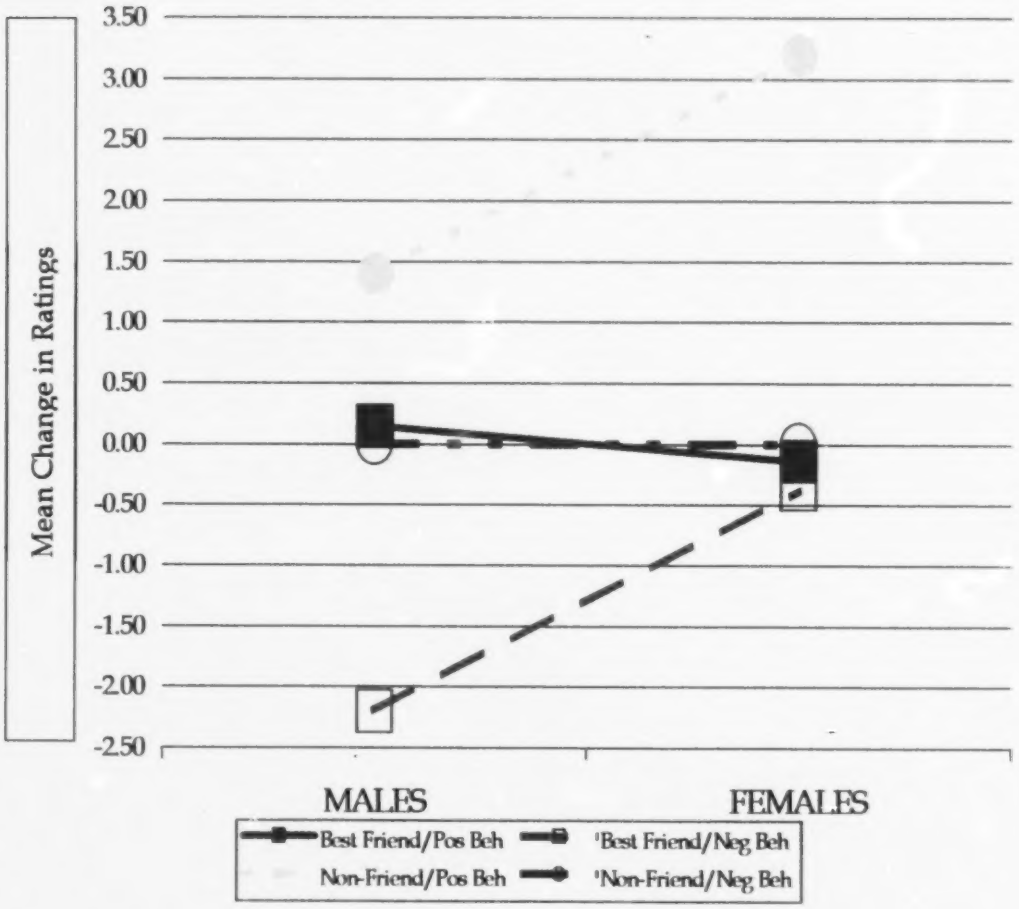
Figure Caption

Figure 1. Mean Change in Liking as a Function of Relationship Expectancy, Behavioral Information, and Sex of Child.



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